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ABSTRACT

This study sought to describe how an elementary school faculty made sense of the impending succession of its principal, and to extend Gephart's effort to develop a grounded theory of leader succession by examining an unforced succession in an organization whose members exerted little if any influence on the selection process. On the basis of interview and observational data, four prevailing norms were identified: a strong sense of order, the instructional isolation of teachers, the lack of personal contact and support for teachers, and the importance of expectations. Findings confirmed Gephart's thesis that the faculty degraded the status of its departing principal, but this status degradation was based on an interaction of professional and organizational norms rather than solely on organizational norms. The conclusion suggests that Gephart's theory of succession would have to be adjusted to accommodate the influence of sources of norms external to the organization. References are included. (Author/TE)

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# HOW A FACULTY MADE SENSE OF THE IMPENDING SUCCESSION OF ITS PRINCIPAL

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The purpose of this study was to describe how a faculty made sense of the impending succession of its principal and to extend Gephart's attempt to derive a grounded theory of leader succession. Like Gephart, we found that the faculty degraded the status of its departing principal. Unlike Gephart, we found that the status degradation was based on an interaction of professional and organizational norms rather than solely on organizational norms. Thus, we concluded that Gephart's theory of succession would have to be adjusted to accomodate the influence of sources of norms other than the organization.

Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Assn. (New Orleans, LA, April 23-27, 1984).

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# HOW A FACULTY MADE SENSE OF THE IMPENDING SUCCESSION OF ITS PRINCIPAL

In this study we sought to describe how a faculty of an elementary school made sense of the impending succession, or change, of its principal. Succession of principals is a common occurrence in public schools. Districts replace principals when schools perform below expectations or simply rotate principals on the belief that it keeps principals and schools from becoming stale. The frequency of principal succession will likely increase in the near future as districts replace retiring administrators. It has been reported that over the next two decades half of the nation's principals will retire and be replaced.[1] Despite the ubiquity of principal succession and the belief that principal succession positively affects schools as well as principals, there is little research on the nature of those effects.

## Background and Conceptual Framework

While there is little research on the succession of administrators in schools[2], there is an abundance of studies on the succession of managers in other types of organizations. Until recently this research has focused on two general issues. Early work tended to focus on the effects of organizational factors on various dimensions of succession. For example, both Grusky[3] and Kriesberg[4] found succession rates in top level executive positions to be higher in large, bureaucratic organizations, findings later disputed by Gordon and Becker[5].

The bulk of the research on administrator succession, however, has examined the relationship between succession and a variety of organizational variables, particularly performance. Much of the work in this vein has sought to determine the direct influence of succession on organizational performance.

The results of this research are mixed. Some studies indicate that organizational performance improves after managerial succession[6], while others show that performance declines[7]. To complicate matters even more, recent work suggests that leader succession exerts little or no influence on the performance of organizations.[8]

The failure to determine a clear, direct relationship between leader succession and organizational performance led to attempts to identify conditions that affect that relationship. Among the factors identified are the administrative style of the successor[9], whether the successor is an insider or an outsider[10], organizational size[11], and the stability of the performance environment[12].

Most recently, research has begun to examine how members of organizations interpret succession events. The emergence of this interpretive perspective reflects the general rise in interest among organization theorists and researchers in the cultural dimension of organizations.[3] Gephart introduced issues that extend beyond the scope of previous succession research and theory in his study of his own succession as the leader of a graduate students' organization.[14] He suggested that attention must be given to the predecessor as well as the successor and to the manner in which organizational members make sense of the succession event. In his study, he found that group members participated in a "status degradation" ceremony that served to specify the norms with which the predecessor was not complying and that served as criteria for the selection of the successor. In developing a grounded theory of leader succession[15], Gephart cited the need to examine succession in other types of organizations and under different circumstances.

While a complete description of the organization in which Gephart conducted his study is not available, it is safe to assume from what is known that that organization differed from a public school in at least one very important way.[16] While members of Gephart's organization exerted an important influence on the succession process, members of a school staff typically are not involved in the appointment of a principal.[17] That decision usually rests in the hands of district administrators. Thus, an examination of leader succession in a public school promises to extend the theory grounded by Gephart in his study along a potentially important dimension.

Gephart noted that an important circumstance of the succession that he investigated was that it was forced rather than voluntary. His tenure as the president of the graduate students' association was terminated not by his own volition but by actions taken by other members. He, therefore, suggested that it would be important to examine the manner in which organizational members made sense of non-forced succession, successions in which the predecessor was not expelled from office as the result of dissatisfaction over his/her performance.[18]

## Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study, then, was to describe the manner in which the faculty of a public elementary school made sense of the impending, unforced succession of its principal. A second purpose was to extend Gephart's effort to develop a grounded theory of leader succession by examining an unforced succession in an organization in which members exerted little if any influence on the selection process.

## Method

Because our purpose was to describe how teachers, themselves, made sense of the impending succession of their principal we selected research methods that would enable us to learn how teachers thought about and acted towards the succession. We employed standard field methods and methods of qualitative data analysis to collect and analyze data. In addition, since little is yet known about how teachers make sense of organizational events[19], or the conditions that influence teachers' sensemaking, we designed the study so that we would be able to examine emergent themes.

Site Selection

We employed three criteria in selecting the site in which this study was conducted. First, we chose to conduct the study in an elementary school. We reasoned that the smaller size of elementary schools would make data gathering more manageable. Second, it was necessary that the impending change of principal was clearly perceived to be unforced. Third, we felt that it would be preferable if entry to the site could be obtained prior to the announcement of the impending change of principal. We would then be able to obtain baseline data on the belief structure of the school and on faculty attitudes towards the incumbent principal.

A site that met all three conditions was identified with the assistance of the Personnel Director of the host school district. The principal of an elementary school was retiring at the end of the school year. The school had the reputation among district administrators as one that operated smoothly and whose students performed reasonably well on standardized achievement tests. In short, the principal was not being forced out as a result of dissatisfaction with his or the school's performance. This was later corroborated by members of the school's faculty. Finally, the principal had

not announced that he would be leaving. As the research team was to later discover, he did not want to disrupt the normal operation of the school by bringing attention to his impending retirement.

Data Collection

We employed three general sources in the collection of data: observation, interview and school documents. Data were gathered during the last ten weeks of the 1982-83 school year. We collected data in the following, roughly chronological sequence: interview of principal upon entry to the site, observation of faculty and faculty-principal interaction, interview of faculty members, further observation and final interviews of principal and teachers. Documents were gathered over the entire period.

Interviews. We conducted two sets of interviews during the course of this study. The first set of interviews was aimed at obtaining background information in the following areas: principal's and teachers' professional backgrounds; the principal's administrative philosophy and description of his work; the principal's view of the strengths and problem areas of the school; teachers' perceptions of the operation of the school; and teachers' perceptions of the principal. These initial interviews were conducted before the announcement of the principal's retirement was made.

We conducted a second set of interviews subsequent to the announcement of the principal's retirement. Our intention here was to determine the meanings that the principal and teachers attached to the impending succession. This was critical to the study, since, as will be reported later, the faculty remained largely uninvolved in the succession process and rarely spoke about the impending change of principal.

Beyond the formal interviews, observations were often punctuated by brief, informal conversations with a teacher or the principal. These exchanges were initiated in one of two ways. In some cases, a teacher or the principal would make an aside to the fieldworker. In other cases, we would ask a teacher or the principal for an explanation of an event that had just occurred.

Observation. Observations were conducted over the final ten weeks of the school year. We began with a general tour of the site conducted by the school's resource teacher. Subsequent observations focused on teacher and teacher-principal interaction, as the purpose of the study was to describe the events that comprised the succession process and to determine how the faculty interpreted the succession. We spent an average of eighteen hours per week on site. Observations were made during various hours of the day and in a variety of locations (e.g., the faculty room, the hallways and the area around the principal's office). Special events scheduled after regular school hours were also observed. For example, we attended a dance festival and a retirement party for the principal hosted by the faculty.

Documents. We collected a variety of documents largely for the purpose of determining the norms and beliefs that characterized the school prior to the announcement of the principal's retirement. To that end, the school student behavior code, the results of a survey of the faculty conducted by the local teachers' organization, various memoranda and notices were collected during the course of the study.

## Analysis

We analyzed the data in two stages. While we were in the field and as field notes began to accumulate, we began the analytical process by

tentatively identifying patterns in the beliefs and norms of the instructional staff of the school, in the process of the succession of the school's principal, and in the sense that teachers and the principal made of the succession. This preliminary analysis guided subsequent observations and the final interviews.

We began the formal analysis after data collection was completed at the end of the school year. Initially working independently, we each reviewed field notes, interview notes and documents. Data collected prior to the announcement of the principal's retirement were analyzed for indications of the norms and beliefs of the faculty and for reflections of teacher attitudes towards the principal. Analysis of data collected after the announcement focused on the succession process and the sense made of the succession by the instructional staff.

As themes began to emerge from the analysis, we conferred. We retained those themes on which a consensus developed. Further, we sought evidence of tentatively identified themes across the three types of data.[20] Finally, we attempted to identify data that were inconsistent with the themes.[21] These three strategies -- multiple researchers, multiple forms of data and a check for contradictory evidence -- were employed to insure the veracity of descriptions of both the succession process and the sense that teachers made of the impending succession in the principalship of their school.

## The Setting

The setting of the study was an important consideration since it provided the backdrop for the succession of the principal and the context in which faculty members made sense of that event. We paid specific attention to several contextual dimensions: the school's facilities and the demographic

characteristics of the school's community and instructional staff. Beyond that, we took the setting to include the set of norms that prevailed among the teachers and the principal.

Developing an understanding of the school's norms was crucial to this study. Gephart found that the sense made of succession events was framed by the norms of the organization in which the succession occurred.[22] This is consistent with Van Maanen's position that organizational belief systems influence meanings that are derived and attached to organizational events.[23] Thus, we thought it crucial to collect baseline data to determine the extent to which existing school norms influenced teachers' sensemaking of the succession of their principal.

The School, Its Community and Staff

Valley School. Valley Elementary School is a small elementary school located in a large school district that encompasses several suburban communities. Most of Valley School's students are the children of white, suburban, working class families. According to the staff at Valley, families in the area tend to be stable units. The small, well groomed tract homes adjacent to the school reflect the social and economic characteristics of their occupants.

The facilities of Valley Elementary are rather typical of elementary schools in the area. Built twenty-two years ago, it is a single story building with a low flat roof. A row of large glass windows shaded with venetian blinds is visible across both the front and rear of the building. A wide lawn, concrete sidewalk and customary flagpole appear before the shrubbery bordering the front of the building. An asphalt parking lot is situated at the eastern end of the building, and an expansive asphalt play

area with one basketball standard in disrepair is located in the rear. Beyond that lies a large grass covered play area which is bordered on all sides by the backyards of adjacent homes.

Entering through the double glass doors of the main entrance places one in the central module. It houses the multi-purpose room which serves as cafeteria, gymnasium and auditorium, the office area and the faculty lounge. Extending from this central unit are two long, uncluttered corridors flanked on both sides by classrooms. The classrooms in the eastern corridor are home to grades two through six, while the western corridor contains classes for kindergarten through grade two. Like most elementary schools, the corridor walls of Valley Elementary are covered with students' artwork and a variety of handmade posters.

The faculty. The faculty of Valley Elementary School is comprised of twenty classroom teachers, one of whom is a half-time kindergarten teacher, and two special education resource teachers. In addition, a media coordinator, a psychologist and social worker visit Valley School on a regular basis. Four men and sixteen women make up the teaching corp.

Valley School's faculty is an experienced and stable group. Their experience in the profession ranges from five to twenty years, while their tenure at Valley ranges from four to sixteen years. Most are products of the local area.

The principal. Valley Elementary School's principal, Mr. Brown, has worked in the district for thirty-five years, first as an elementary teacher and then as a principal. He has worked as a principal for a total of nineteen years and has held his appointment at Valley for the past twelve years. Mr. Brown holds a Master's degree in educational administration. Like most

principals (NASSP, 1978), Mr. Brown is white, male, active in community activities (in his case, the church) and raised and educated locally.

The Norms of The Valley School Faculty

On the basis of interview and observational data, we identified four prevailing norms at Valley Elementary School: a strong sense of order, the instructional isolation of teachers, the lack of personal contact and support for teachers and the importance of expectations from sources outside the school.

Order. Valley Elementary is an orderly school. Orderliness extends from its physical appearance to expectations for teacher and student behavior to the manner in which school business is conducted.

Valley School's physical plant is rather ordinary. As we have noted, it is a single story building with two classroom wings that extend from a central module which contains the multipurpose room, teachers' lounge and work areas and the office. But a sense of order is immediately apparent. For example, classrooms are assigned in descending order of grade level. In the eastern wing, sixth grade classes occupy rooms closest to the central module, while second grade classes are assigned to rooms at the far end of the wing. Similarly, in the shorter western wing the first grade classes are housed in the rooms adjacent to the central module and kindergarten classes meet in the rooms at the end of the hall. This arrangement apparently is not based upon instructional considerations as teachers were not observed to employ strategies, such as grouping students by ability across classes, that would be facilitated by physical proximity. The sense of order is further underscored by the total absence of clutter in the corridors.

Order is also expected in the behavior of both faculty and students. With regard to the faculty, all of the classroom teachers indicated in their initial interviews that Mr. Brown, the principal, emphasized the importance of having neat classrooms. For example, a second grade teacher commented, "He insists on having the classroom neat. So, I put all of my stuff in the corner behind a blackboard." Another remarked that, "He's critical that the room is messy." At least two of the teachers said plainly that Mr. Brown "likes order."

Orderly student behavior is especially emphasized at Valley. This is highlighted by two posters that hang on the corridor walls adjacent to the school office. One contains photographs of the students who are the recipients of the monthly "Good Citizenship Award." The second poster shows the monthly attendance records for every class in the school. Similarly, the "Valley School Student Behavior Code" outlines appropriate behavior for the playground, restrooms, halls, learning areas and regarding school cleanliness. The code goes on to stipulate specific punishments, such as picking up papers on the playground, sweeping entrancess, cleaning floors, vaccuuming the rug, standing at attention in the corner and missing a special activity.

The emphasis on orderly student conduct goes beyond posters and words in the behavior code. The staff carefully monitors the behavior of students. The following is an example. When the bell signaling the beginning of the lunch period sounds, teachers lead their classes to the cafeteria. The students are arranged in two columns, one of boys and the second of girls. They line up in the hallway before entering the cafeteria. Students are then allowed to enter, collect their lunches at the counter, and take their seats.

All of this is monitored by the teacher and an aide. Each class is assigned to certain tables, marked by signs on the wall. Again, boys are separated from girls.

School business is conducted with the same attention to order that is reflected in Valley School's appearance and expected in the behavior of teachers and students. In fact, Mr. Brown comments that an important part of his job is to pay "attention to details in organizing school activities." The truth of his words are nowhere more evident than in his operation of the school lunch program. Parents are reminded through special notes and notices in the PTA and school newsletters to send lunch money with their children on Monday of every week. One part-time secretary's primary assignment is to manage the lunch program. Each monday morning she, with the assistance of the full-time secretary, visits each classroom to collect the week's lunch money. Students are given tickets which they redeem for lunch. Students who have failed to purchase a lunch ticket on Monday are not allowed to purchase a lunch during the week.

Another example of the orderly operation of Valley School involves the book inventory conducted at the close of the school year. During a faculty meeting held more than two weeks before the end of the school year, Mr. Brown requested that all teachers "note whether or not the students have them (the books). Then you only need to do a quick check when they're handed in." On the preceding day, five teachers casually talking in the lounge complained about having to conduct the inventory so long before the actual end of instruction.

Instructional Isolation. A second norm evident at Valley Elementary School involves the isolation of teachers from the principal and other members

of the faculty regarding instructional matters. Mr. Brown indicated this sentiment when, in talking about supervising teachers, he said, "I let them go about their business..." This statement was verified both by Mr. Brown's actions and teachers' interview responses. The principal was not observed to visit classrooms during the period of this study. And, all teachers stated that Mr. Brown observed them twice during the school year and, then, for only short periods of time, five to ten minutes. It should be noted that principals are required by district policy to observe teachers on at least two occasions during the school year. Further, a majority of the teachers observed that Mr. Brown never commented on the way they taught, but made suggestions regarding student conduct and the tidiness of their classrooms.

Teachers are also isolated from other teachers in instructional matters. While teachers did organize by grade level for the school's spring dance festival and sometimes arranged to combine classess for field trips, no collaborative instructional efforts were observed. Reinforcing this was the observation of very few occasions on which teachers discussed instructional matters in the teachers' lounge. On the day that achievement test scores were released, teachers did review the scores and raised questions about the adequacy of their instructional techniques. For example, a second grade teacher noted that her students had done less well on math computation than on math concepts, despite her concentration over the past year on the development of computational skills. However, even in this case no exchange regarding instructional techniques took place between teachers. That teachers valued their isolation from the influence of other teachers was evident in a comment made by a teacher in the faculty lounge before school. She indicated that she "took offense" to the principal's suggestion made during a faculty meeting on

the previous day that the faculty might adopt some new ideas developed by one of Valley School's teachers.

Lack of personal contact and reinforcement. A third norm that characterized Valley School was the absence of personal contact between the principal and teachers and among teachers. During the period of this study, Mr. Brown, the principal, was rarely observed interacting with individual teachers on an informal and personal basis. He seldom entered the faculty lounge. These observations are consistent with teachers' interview responses. They uniformly noted that Mr. Brown did not interact easily with teachers. Two teachers characterized the principal as distant and paternal; five simply described him as shy. A third grade teacher commented, "At first, I thought he didn't like to talk with people. This bothers people." A fifth grade teacher underscored this view of the principal by comparing him with his predecessor: "He's basically just a shy person...The one before Mr. Brown, you could go into his office and talk."

While most interview responses about the lack of personal contact focused on the relationship between the principal and teachers, there was some evidence that there was little personal contact among teachers as well. While teachers did interact informally in the faculty lounge, there was no evidence that teachers ever met socially after school or on weekends. Two teachers lamented that teachers at Valley School no longer met socially outside of school hours, suggesting that they once had. Another teacher commented that Valley's faculty did not mix socially as much as faculties of other schools in which she had taught. One teacher observed that the principal set the tone for the overall absence of social interaction among the faculty.

Teachers also felt that the principal did not provide reinforcement, positive or negative, on an individual basis. This was mentioned by all teachers during their interviews. One sixth grade teacher commented, "I guess I need praise; (to be told) you're doing okay." And a third grade teacher observed, "He has a problem confronting people about weaknesses...He has a hard time expressing himself, even praising...It has frustrated me on occasion, because you don't get a lot of feedback." Three teachers noted that when Mr. Brown did criticize teachers he often criticized the entire faculty rather than speaking with the teacher who was involved. One, a first grade teacher, said, "You don't get feedback. Only in group situations. He chastises you as a group, never goes to the individual."

Several teachers linked the principal's failure to reinforce teachers to his general difficulty in interacting with people on an individual basis. A second grade teacher observed, "He's a shy person. It's not easy for him to compliment." Another second grade teacher noted, "He (the principal) doesn't compliment, so they think he doesn't care. But he's just shy." However, many teachers did interpret Mr. Brown's reluctance to praise as failing to "support" their efforts, as the following statement indicates: "We put on a ...program. We put a lot of work into it. It's in a vaccuum. There's not a comment."

Expectations from outside the school. The feeling on the part of many teachers that Mr. Brown did not support them and their efforts on an individual basis was also reflected in a norm concerning the need for the school to be responsive to two elements in Valley Elementary School's external environment: parents and the school district. Again, they laid much of the responsibility for the setting of this norm at the feet of the principal.

Members of Valley School's faculty, with few exceptions, believed that Mr. Brown did not support them against the demands and accusations of parents. A majority of the teachers recounted stories in which parents had criticized a teacher and demanded that their child be transferred to another class. All of these stories had the same ending. The principal acquiesced to the parents' wishes and transferred the child, often against the protests of the teacher. As one first grade teacher remarked, "Many teachers feel he doesn't support them with parents...If a parent comes in to complain and requests a transfer, he tends to do it. Sometimes without consulting teachers." A third grade teacher's comment expands this point: "Teachers don't feel like we get support. When we have problems with parents, he tends to accuse teachers. When parents complain about some classroom practice, he drags kids out of class and asks them before going to the teacher. He transfers kids easily. Sometimes he doesn't even tell teachers why."

One teacher explained what she perceived to be the principal's reason for acquiescing to parental pressure: "He does transfer students too easily, but his idea is that conflict isn't good for anybody...I think everybody is afraid of parents, even the district." The principal, himself, acknowledged that teachers felt that he was "kind of soft on making transfers." However, he explained that "it is a losing cause to resist parents. They will look for every little problem."

Teachers also believed that the emphasis placed on achievement test scores at Valley Elementary resulted from the acquiescence of their principal to external pressure. The importance of achievement tests was evident in several events that we observed. For example, the principal referred to achievement test results during a discussion with a teacher about a student's

behavioral problems. On another occasion, the principal mentioned that the main criteria for involvement in a special computer class was performance on the achievement test.

However, the importance of achievement tests was perhaps most clearly illustrated by the events that occurred on the morning on which test scores were distributed to the teachers. Each teacher received copies of both a report on the performance of the total school and a report on the performance of his/her class. The distribution of test results precipitated the only observed occasion on which at least half of the faculty and the principal were involved in a topical discussion in the teachers' lounge before school. What's more, it provided the impetus for one of the few observed instances in which teachers compared instructional strategies. When a teacher discovered that the students of another teacher on the same grade level had scored better than her students on one portion of the test, she queried both the principal and the other teacher about what he had done differently.

The observation that achievement test scores were considered to be important at Valley School was corroborated by the teachers. In fact, all teachers attributed this to the emphasis that the principal had placed on achievement tests. Moreover, they saw it as an example of Mr. Brown's tendency to succumb to pressure exerted by authorities at the district level. For example, a first grade teacher commented, "He's very district oriented. Seems that the district leans on him and he leans on the teachers. He places a big emphasis on test scores." A second grade teacher concurred: "The importance he places on achievement tests is partly the district." The point that needs to be emphasized here is that the principal's expectations for the performance

of his school were largely predicated upon the expectations of elements in his school's environment, namely parents and school district officials.

### Setting Norms

There is one final point about the norms of Valley School that is important to this study: how participants viewed the setting of norms. Teachers tended to attribute a large portion of the responsibility for setting the norms described above to their principal. In the case of orderliness, for example, teachers noted that it was Mr. Brown who emphasized classroom neatness, removed the clutter from hallways, and organized the lunch and book inventory routines. Similarly, teachers credited the principal with setting the norms regarding the lack of personal contact and responsiveness to external influences. With regard to the former, teachers reported that the principal did not interact easily with them, provided little individual reinforcement, and was even responsible for the lack of personal interaction among teachers. With regard to the latter, they noted that it was the principal who acquiesced to parental pressure and responded to the district's emphasis on standardized achievement test scores. Teachers, then, took little responsibility for the setting of school level norms. This will be important factor in our discussion of the findings.

## Findings:

### The Succession and Its Meaning for Teachers

Against the backdrop of the norms outlined above, the faculty of Valley Elementary School experienced and made sense of the impending succession of its principal. The manner in which the pre-succession events occurred seemed to influence as well as reflect the meanings that teachers attached to the succession and therefore requires explicit attention. In this section, we

will recount the pre-succession process and then describe the meanings that the faculty attached to the succession of its principal.

The Succession Process

Once Mr. Brown, the principal of Valley Elementary School for twelve years, made the decision to retire, the events that led up to his succession were played out at two levels: the school district and the school. For the most part, action at one level remained entirely separate from action at the other level.

The school district. According to school district officials, the decision regarding Mr. Brown's successor was made at the district level. District officials simply assigned one member of a pool of available administrators to the post at Valley Elementary. That pool included both experienced principals tabbed for reassignment and individuals recently selected for appointment to principalships.

The district officials explained that while they did seek input from leaders among the parents of Valley School's students regarding the type of person they desired as the next principal, they did not request the input of teachers. One administrator noted that teachers should not be involved in the selection of principals because "every teacher has a different opinion." Once the appointment was made, the school district informed Mr. Brown who then informed his faculty.

The school. While the district was making decisions about Mr. Brown's successor, quite another story was unfolding at Valley School. Although Mr. Brown had notified the district in March that he would retire at the end of the school year, he had decided not to inform his faculty until the last day of school. The only person on the school's staff that he took into his

confidence was the secretary. He explained that he had not wanted people to make an event of his retirement.

However, according to several teachers rumors were flying about Mr. Brown's impending retirement from early in the school year. Finally, Mr. Brown found that his secret had been leaked by a family friend. So, on April 26th he announced his retirement at a faculty meeting. He asked the teachers not to "say anything to the kids or parents." His announcement was greeted with smiles from all of the teachers and the question: "What are your plans?" He answered that retirement would give him an opportunity to spend time with his wife and to consider the possibility of joining his son's insurance agency. He indicated that he had already passed his insurance agent's examination.

After the meeting had been formally adjourned, the teachers met with the secretary to plan a retirement dinner for Mr. Brown. The secretary indicated that she had already made reservations for the occasion, so the discussion turned to purchasing a gift for Mr. Brown.

In the days that followed, little mention was made of Mr. Brown's retirement or the prospects of having a new principal at Valley Elementary. A week and a half after Mr. Brown's announcement, a teacher commented in the faculty lounge that she wished that the district would announce the name of the new principal. She concluded that, "They'll probably announce it during the summer. We'll probably find out about it when we read it in the newspaper."

During a faculty meeting one month after Mr. Brown announced his retirement, talk turned to the opening of school for the next school year. While Mr. Brown answered questions regarding when teachers would be able to

get into the building to prepare and whether or not Valley would again be on the late schedule, he deferred to his successor when the issue of using an extra day allotted to teachers to attend the district's Institute prior to the opening of school was raised. He simply said that, "It's really up to the new principal." He then promised to inform his successor of the faculty's inclination.

On May 24th, just one and a half weeks before the close of school, a teacher commented during a conversation in the faculty lounge before school that she had heard "good things" about the new principal. According to this sixth grade teacher, he is reputed to be "...a teacher's principal, supportive."

The faculty of Valley Elementary School hosted a retirement dinner for its principal, Mr. Brown, on the evening of May 25th. The dinner was held on the campus of a nearby university. Most members of the faculty, some with spouses, were in attendance. There was an awkward moment as the group began to gather when it was noticed that Mr. Brown and his wife were the lone occupants of the table at the front of the room. However, that passed when other members of Mr. Brown's family arrived and were ushered up to join him. After dinner, various staff members performed musical numbers or read poems. Two of the songs and all of the poems were written expressly for the occasion. One of the poems recalled several aspects of Mr. Brown's tenure as principal: his having to please parents, teachers and the area superintendent; the first grade teachers' decision to use a reading series different from that used at the other grade levels; and his running to the store to keep the candy machine stocked. It closed by noting that he could now "tear up those organized plans" and that "another funny principal will take your place." One

of the songs observed that Mr. Brown would be able to wash out of his life, among other things, budgets, test scores, parent complaints, faculty complaints, schedules and meetings.

The only other event related to the impending succession of the principal was a non-event. Mr. Brown's successor was scheduled to visit Valley Elementary during the last week of school. He was to meet with Mr. Brown and to tour the facility. However, at the last minute his visit was cancelled.

How Teachers Made Sense of The Succession

As teachers experienced events associated with the succession of their principal, what sense did they make of them? We found through our analysis of the events recounted above and teachers' interview responses regarding their thoughts about the impending succession that teachers' responses fell into three general categories: detachment, fear and expectation.

Detachment. The first type of response of teachers to the impending succession of the principal was a sense of detachment. This detachment manifested itself in two ways. First, it is clear that teachers were not involved directly in the succession process. Teachers recognized that they were not called upon to participate in the selection of the successor: "Teachers often get called upon to provide input on new curriculum and instructional materials, but not on selecting a principal."

Second, teachers minimized the importance of the succession to the operation of the school. Approximately one-third of the teachers expressed the belief that a change of principal simply didn't matter. One teacher explained that "it doesn't really matter that much" by recounting the following story. She had worked in another school before coming to Valley. In that school, the principal had been killed in a traffic accident. For five

months, the teachers and a secretary were left to run the school, and, as this teacher told it, "We did just fine." The same sense of detachment seemed to be captured in one line of the poem composed and read at Mr. Brown's retirement dinner by a teacher: "The principal will retire soon and another funny principal will take his place." And, as if to punctuate the detachment of teachers from the succession process and the lack of import of the succession for the work of teachers, the successor never visited his new school.

Fear. A second type of response among teachers was fear. Roughly eighty percent of the teachers indicated that they approached the succession of their principal with some fear or anxiety. They feared one of two things: the unknown and a loss of autonomy. About one third of Valley Elementary's teachers indicated that they simply feared the unknown. As they expressed it, they were not sure how they would get along with the new principal. For example, a third grade teacher responded, "It's kind of exciting, but it's scary because you don't know how the new boss will relate to you." Similarly, a sixth grade teacher responded this way to the announcement of Mr. Brown's retirement: "I was real disappointed because the status quo is safe, especially when we don't know who is coming.

At least half of the teachers were more specific about the nature of their fear. They were concerned that the new principal might intrude on their instructional prerogative. For example, one teacher reflected, "...it could be worse. Not a lot to complain about now, because he (Mr. Brown) leaves teachers alone." This fear was also reflected in a reservation that several teachers shared about female principals: "Women principals are picky. Feel they wouldn't let you do your own thing."

Expectation. The opposite side of the fear that teachers experienced over the change of principal was a sense of expectation. This sentiment was expressed by all teachers. The sense of expectation focused on characteristics that the faculty hoped the new principal would possess. The teachers of Valley Elementary seemed to look for three qualities: a willingness to support teachers, friendliness and the ability to develop a sense of unity.

Some sixty percent of the teachers expressed the hope that the new principal would support the faculty. By support, the teachers seemed to mean that they wanted a principal who would take an interest in and reinforce what individual teachers did. A fourth grade teacher said it this way: "I would like to have a principal who is more involved in school and more interested in what teachers are doing." A third grade teacher simply said, "I want a principal who is positive, reinforcing." Finally, a sixth grade teacher indicated that she had heard the following about the new principal: "I've heard good things. He's a teachers' principal. He's supportive." Interestingly, the characterizations of the successor that had been received by teachers at Valley Elementary through the grapevine were all very general and emphasized that he was considered to be "good to work for."

Over half of the teachers also indicated that they wanted a principal who had a pleasant interpersonal style. They used words such as "friendly", "outgoing" and "personable" to describe the type of person whom they would like to have as their next principal.

Finally, about one-third of the faculty expressed a desire to have a principal who was able to develop a sense of unity in the faculty. One teacher hoped that the succession would bring "Someone who'll say here is a

picture of where we can go, (and ask) what do you think?" Comments from teachers suggest that the sense of unity they sought would revolve largely around instructional issues. For example, one teacher remarked, "I'm hoping for a principal who has a more intellectual approach to curriculum and who shows more intellectual involvement." Another expressed this expectation and the fear of instructional intrusion in one breath: "We need someone who can bring the faculty together for a common purpose, but I still want one who will let me do my own thing."

## Discussion

Beyond simply describing how a faculty made sense of the succession of its principal, our purpose in conducting this study was to extend Gephart's effort to develop a grounded theory of leader succession in organizations.[24] Glaser and Strauss suggested that theorists select groups that differ systematically from groups already studied in order to increase the generality of grounded theory.[25] Therefore, we chose to study an organization that differed from the organization in Gephart's study in two ways. First, we examined an organization undergoing an unforced succession of its administrator, while Gephart examined a forced succession. Second, members of the organization in the present study, unlike the members of Gephart's organization, did not participate in selecting the successor.

In extending the generality of the grounded theory proposed by Gephart, we addressed two questions: To what extent does the theory of leader succession, which is based in the concept of status degradation, proposed by Gephart apply to the findings of the present study? If the findings of the present study are not consistent with Gephart's proposed theory, what adjustments to the theory are necessary to accommodate the inconsistency?

Does Status Degradation Apply?

As we noted earlier, Gephart studied his own removal from office as the president of a graduate students' organization. He found that group members participated in a "status degradation" process which served to specify the organizational norms with which he, Gephart, had not complied and that would serve as criteria for the selection of his successor.

To what extent does the concept of status degradation apply to the present study? Generally, the teachers of Valley Elementary School, unlike the members of the organization studied by Gephart, did not participate in a public and collective status degradation process. However, they individually experienced something akin to a status degradation process in their minds. The elements of degradation as described by Gephart were present: the presence of a system of beliefs, or norms, about the day to day operation of the organization; the critical assessment of the predecessor's performance relative to some of the organizational norms; the attribution of adherence to the norms violated by the predecessor to the successor.[26]

We identified four general norms that characterized Valley School: order, instructional isolation, lack of personal interaction and support, and responsiveness to external influences. We found that the manner in which teachers made sense of the principal succession was framed, to a large extent, by some of these norms.

Although the norm of order was not explicitly reflected in sensemaking, teachers did fear that they would lose the instructional isolation that they enjoyed under the predecessor. Similarly, they hoped, both before and after the identity of the successor was known, that the successor would possess qualities that the predecessor lacked. They hoped that the successor would be

personable, supportive of the faculty and provide a sense of unity in the school. However, while school norms were reflected in faculty sensemaking, the predecessor's status was not degraded as the result of non-adherence. Rather, with the exception of the isolation norm, teachers degraded the predecessor and, in a sense, attributed qualities to the successor, as the result of the predecessor's adherence to norms of impersonality and responsiveness to external influences.

The Importance of Professional Norms

How might this departure from Gephart's grounded theory of succession be explained? The answer, we believe, lies in the influence of norms rooted not in the school but in the profession of teaching.

Research indicates that, among other things, teachers have a very individualistic orientation towards their work.[27] That individualism is manifested in several ways. The first and most often acknowledged is the instructional isolation of teachers.[28] Parents, administrators, and colleagues are viewed as intruders. The existence and strength of this norm led Lortie to conclude that "...teachers attach a great meaning to the boundaries which separate their classrooms from the rest of the school..." The individualistic orientation of teachers is also found in the importance placed by teachers on the development of interpersonal bonds with their students[29] and in the fact that teachers are rewarded by the success of individual students[30].

The manner in which teachers made sense of their principal's succession seems to have been influenced by the norm of individualism in two ways. First, the norm provided a boundary between the teachers' domain of the classroom and the principal's domain of the school. This boundary enabled

teachers to attribute the establishing of school norms to the principal. For example, they contended that the norm of impersonality that guided interactions both between the principal and teachers and among teachers was the result of the principal's behavior. Having disavoved responsibility for the setting of norms, teachers could then criticize individuals, including their principal, for adhering to them.

The succession process, itself, seemed to reinforce the sense of distance between teachers and the principal. Teachers, it will be recalled, had no role in the selection of the successor. Some even assumed that they would not be directly informed about the identity of the individual who would be their principal for the next school year. Further, teachers minimized the importance of principals and, therefore, of the succession to their work in their classrooms.

The second way in which the norm of individualism influenced sensemaking was that it provided teachers with the standard against which they degraded the status of their principal. The behaviors for which the principal was criticized tended to reflect school norms that were inconsistent with the manifestations of the individualistic orientation of teachers cited above. For instance, teachers generally want to be left alone to teach; at Valley they felt that they were not buffered from the intrusions of parents and the school district. Teachers work to develop interpersonal bonds with students; at Valley the principal did not develop close relationships with teachers. Teachers in general are rewarded by the success of individual students; the teachers at Valley never sensed that their principal noticed the efforts of individual teachers. In a sense, the principal was criticized for not behaving and thinking like a teacher. Thus, the status of the principal at

Valley School was degraded for noncompliance with a central norm of the teaching profession as the result of his compliance of school norms. That teachers were pleased with the autonomy they had enjoyed under the predecessor and feared the loss of it under the successor underscores the importance of the teacher norm of individualism in how teachers made sense of the succession.

Interestingly, the themes in teacher sensemaking that we have described were evident during the one public degradation ceremony in which teachers participated. The faculty and staff of Valley Elementary School hosted a retirement dinner for their principal and members of his family. During the dinner several teachers sang songs or read poems that reflected many of the sensemaking themes that we have identified. For example, one teacher alluded to the separation of teachers in their classroom domain from the principal in his school domain when she recited, "tear up those organized plans...another funny principal will take your place." She recounted the principal's difficulty in dealing with the school district and parents and recalled the autonomy of first grade teachers who selected a different reading series than that selected by teachers of other grades. Finally, for one awkward moment the absence of close interpersonal relationships between the teachers and the principal was evident. No one seemed to know what to do when they realized that the principal and his wife were sitting alone at a table while the seats at other tables were quickly being filled by teachers and their spouses. In conclusion, the teachers, while gentle, distanced themselves from the principal and degraded the principal's status for failing to comply with the teacher norm of individualism.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study seem to support Gephart's notion that members of an organization degrade the status of the predecessor during the process leading up to the succession event.[31] However, they also expose a limitation of his grounded theory of leader succession. We did find that organizational members who are confronted with an unforced and who are not involved in the selection of the successor, can degrade the status of the predecessor. However, unlike Gephart we found that the status degradation was based on the administrator's adherence rather than nonadherence to organizational norms. We have argued that this discrepancy can be explained by the presence and influence of norms other than those rooted in the organization. In the present case, the norm of individualism that characterizes the profession of teaching colored the manner in which teachers made sense of the succession of their principal. That norm enabled teachers to separate themselves from the school-level norms to which the principal adhered and provided standards by which the principal's adherence to school-level norms was degraded.

This difference of findings reveals a limitation of Gephart's conceptualization of leader succession: the narrowness of its consideration of the sources of norms that frame participants' sensemaking. Apparently, how participants make sense of an impending succession in a top administrative post is not as simple as Gephart portrayed it. Rather than being influenced by one set of norms, sensemaking in organizations seems to be influenced by the interaction of multiple sets of norms. We, of course, found that professional norms and school norms influenced teachers' sensemaking. It is also likely that other sources of norms, such as dominant social institutions in organizations' external environments, will influence sensemaking as well.

Thus, future research must seek to uncover the range of sources of norms that affect the manner in which participants interpret organizational events and to examine the dynamics of the interaction of sets of norms.

Research might also reach beyond identifying norms that frame organizational sensemaking and examining the interaction of sets of norms to attend to describing systematic differences between the sets of norms activated in different contexts. While it is outside of the scope of this paper to speculate at length on the nature of such differences, a comparison of this study's findings and those obtained by Gephart is suggestive. As we have reported, we, unlike Gephart, found that professional norms interacted with organizational norms to frame participant sensemaking. Gephart, of course, studied a graduate students' association, while we studied a school. Graduate students, unlike teachers, are not exposed to the influences of a profession. Thus, the difference in the findings of the two studies is not surprising. The comparison of findings does, however, indicate that sensemaking in organizations in which professionals work will be framed, in part, by norms of the profession. In more general terms, it may be that organizations in which participants are influenced or controlled by some external group, organization or other collectivity, that the norms of that external group will be manifested in the sensemaking of the organization. The point simply is that future work could begin to consider differences in sensemaking patterns across types of organizations.

NOTES

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